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In its effort to build a modern 21st-century fighting force, China has had its own revolution in military affairs that has touched almost every aspect of the armed forces. Chinese special-operations forces have been no exception.

Major transformations in China's elite special forces began taking place in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹ The People's Liberation Army, or PLA, has concentrated on selecting the highest quality individuals within the military, providing them with the most advanced equipment available, and training them in a wide range of military disciplines. The PLA has placed a high degree of emphasis on the physical and mental abilities of the candidates: The training can be grueling, and those who are found to be unsuited are cut from the program immediately. The dropout rate during initial training is said to average between 50 and 90 percent.²

Within the military forces of the People's Republic of China, or PRC, there are many units that could be classified as "special forces." They include rapid-reaction forces, airborne divisions, amphibious landing units and marines. While these organizations certainly fit the category of special forces, for the purposes of this article, they will be considered to be large special-mission units and therefore not included. Instead, the focus here will be on smaller, more elite units tasked with unconventional or asymmetrical warfare.³

Two developments have provided excellent methods for separating Chinese special forces from the larger special-purpose components. The first development is a sharpening of doctrine regarding the special forces' missions. In *An Analysis of 20th Century Com-*

bat Theory, authors Chang Wanquan and Yu Guohua of the *People's Liberation Army Daily* provide a summary of the operating doctrine of PLA special forces. They note, "Special forces warfare includes detailed battle theories, such as special forces reconnaissance, attacks and sabotage, and comprehensive battle theories, such as integrated land-sea-air-space-electronic combat, all-dimensional simultaneous attacks, nonlinear combat, no-contact long-range warfare, asymmetrical combat, large-scale night combat and 'surgical' strikes."⁴

The second development is the adoption of code names to distinguish units, which is often done by select military organizations.⁵ The PLA has assigned at least one dedicated special forces unit to each military region.⁶ The size of the special-forces unit depends upon the military region. Units have been reported to range from battalion to division size.⁷

While Chinese special forces are designed to perform various operations, their two main missions are direct action and special reconnaissance. Direct action can be broken down into five categories: decapitation, harassment, security, terrorist response and rescue. (These are the author's categories, not the PLA's.)

Direct action

Decapitation. The decapitation strategy of Chinese special forces is to attack key personnel and control elements, leaving the enemy leaderless and unable to communicate.⁸ China's military has conducted exercises employing special forces using various modes of transport, such as helicopters and powered parachutes, to attack enemy command posts.⁹

While destroying enemy command-and-control elements is certainly not a new concept, it is possible that the PRC may add a new strategic wrinkle to the scenario in the event of conflict with Taiwan. The strategy would involve a pre-emptive strike against the Taiwanese civilian leadership prior to the outbreak of major hostilities between the two countries.¹⁰ There have been rumors that the PRC plans to infiltrate, or has infiltrated, special-forces units into Taiwan to capture or kill key government leaders. This would enable the PRC either to force the Taiwanese government to negotiate or to replace it altogether with a government more supportive of mainland China.

This decapitation operation could theoretically be accomplished in a short period of time, which could eliminate outside intervention and negate some of the problems associated with a force-on-force action.¹¹ It must be emphasized that this type of operation is dependent upon the PRC being able to stand up an alternate means of governing the country.

Harassment. Harassment activities are designed to inhibit the enemy's ability to operate, or as Jiang Jianxiong, the battalion commander of the Flying Dragons, phrased it, "To make the special forces battalion the 'eyes' of our side and a 'thorn' in the flesh of the other side."¹² These disruptions include sabotage of equipment and systems, attacks on vital civilian infrastructure, and ambush of military forces.¹³ Psychological operations may also play a part in the overall scheme, with special forces carrying out raids simply to cause fear and confusion behind enemy lines.

Security. Security operations include the shielding of air and naval

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Shadow:

Chinese Special Forces Build a 21st-Century Fighting Force

Story by Scott J. Henderson

facilities for follow-on forces after a strike.¹⁴ Special forces are also expected to be able to handle “sudden incidents” that occur within the country.¹⁵ An article written in the *People’s Liberation Army Daily* may provide a clue as to what sudden incidents entail. In the article, a military training department suggests, “The troops, key units, special forces, and emergency special safeguard detachments stationed in areas where natural disasters and violent terrorist activities happen frequently should conduct training in a selective manner, install a near-actual-combat situation, emphasize training in dealing with an emergency and effecting an emergency rescue, and improve their capabilities to cope with various sudden incidents.”¹⁶

Terrorist response. Terrorist-response activities have been noted beginning in 2002. The PLA has included antiterrorism as a part of its new training program for special-forces units and intends to make it an integral part of their future mission.¹⁷ On Jan. 4, 2002, it was reported, “A special forces regiment in the Chengdu Military Region known as the Hunting Leopards carried out an antiterrorist exercise for the first time.”¹⁸ Links between this unit and the People’s Armed Police, or PAP, cannot be ruled out because, historically, PAP forces have handled antiterrorist activities. From Aug. 6-12, 2003, Chinese special forces participated (with member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) in Coalition-2003, a “multinational” joint exercise in antiterrorism.¹⁹ On July 15, 2004, the *People’s Liberation Army Daily* reported on a “multinational counterterrorism exercise,” consisting of combined-arms and special-forces troops, that was carried out in the Xinjiang Military District.²⁰

Rescue. Rescue operations range from securing the release of hostages to searching for and retrieving downed pilots. In 1999, the Beijing, Jinan and Shenyang military regions carried out a consolidated training exercise that included hostage and battlefield rescues.²¹

Special reconnaissance

An article in the *Hong Kong Kuang Chiao Ching* provided a generic description of the special-reconnaissance mission of Chinese special forces:

*During wartime, special forces usually send small teams deep behind enemy lines to collect and monitor enemy information in regions that are of concern to their headquarters and provide urgently needed information. In war, special forces can carry out strategic, campaign and tactical-level special-reconnaissance missions, and through special reconnaissance, they can obtain relevant data on the weather, hydrological and geographical features of specific regions. Special reconnaissance includes actions such as target search, area evaluation and verifying the effects of a strike. Special forces use reconnaissance by combat and monitoring techniques similar to those used by long-range monitoring units. However, more often than not, more advanced technology is used in special reconnaissance.*²²

China’s special forces use “triphibious” (sea, air and land) means of infiltration to conduct short-term and sustained reconnaissance behind enemy lines, using digitized battleground monitors and unmanned reconnaissance aircraft to relay information back to their command units.²³

Training for PLA special forces is exacting and can be quite dangerous. Safety is not emphasized as it is in

the West; on the contrary, it appears to be a source of pride for the Chinese to train their troops under hazardous conditions.²⁴ The majority of training for PLA special forces takes place in one of three categories: infiltration, mountain training, or wilderness and survival training.

Infiltration training

The ability to infiltrate undetected behind enemy lines is one of the most essential skills required for China’s special forces. While little is known about the actual training methods, Chinese special forces are said to undergo “highly intensive and comprehensive multi-course training in complex terrain, including in-depth infiltration and ‘covered reconnaissance’ behind the enemy line.”²⁵ The Chinese use a “three-dimensional” “all-weather” infiltration approach, using sea (submarine, high-speed ferry, open-water swimming and scuba diving), air (airborne, powered parachute and helicopter) and land (long-distance movement and rock climbing).

Sea infiltration. Sea training is known to comprise three elements: open-sea swimming, sea demolition and sea shooting.²⁶ “During sea training [special forces] are tested to their physical limit conducting dangerous and difficult courses, including a 10,000-meter (approximately 6.2 miles) swim, a nighttime swim in full gear, diving, underwater transport and survival drills on islets.”²⁷ Infiltration by submarine is also a common method of insertion in which trainees may perform various missions, such as clearing away underwater mines.²⁸

Air infiltration. In parachute training, the PLA has “effected a gradual transition from using multi-type para-



Fierce Tigers
of the Northeast
SHENYANG MILITARY REGION



Sword of Southern China
GUANGDONG MILITARY REGION



Falcons of the Southwest
CHENGDU MILITARY REGION

chutes and planes to armed parachuting in mountain areas and over waters from both high- and low-altitude insertion.²⁹ One of the unique infiltration methods devised by the PLA for penetrating enemy lines is the use of powered parachutes and paragliders.

Land infiltration. In various exercises, special forces have been able to penetrate through defensive positions that use night-vision equipment, noise- and motion-warning systems, anti-infantry radar systems and other high-tech warning equipment.³⁰ The penetration techniques used by the units, the conditions under which the exercises were carried out, and the exact type and age of the detection equipment are all unknown.

Mountain training

With a majority of special-forces training focusing on cross-Taiwan Strait confrontations, the mountainous terrain of Taiwan takes on a special significance. Taiwan is divided north to south by a central mountain range that covers 2/3 of the northeast.³¹ The ability to operate in this type of environment is vital, considering that during the early 1990s Taiwan constructed hardened underground shelters capable of protecting at least 1/3 of the country's fighter aircraft from direct missile attack.³² It is almost certain from the words of the PLA special forces commander, Jiang Jianxiong, that his forces train for this type of operation. He advocated "attacking the enemy's hangars and caves housing their aircraft" as a new tactic.³³

China routinely trains in a variety of mountainous areas said to offer extremely harsh conditions. The Chinese have conducted combined-arms and individual soldier training from around 12,000 to 18,000 feet above sea level. Training and testing included:

- The use of heavy equipment, determining its maximum speed and climbing capability at different altitudes, in various types of terrain and under different climates.
- Maximum rate of fire and range of fire of different weapons.
- Long-range raids lasting up to four hours, followed by extended periods of work in altitudes approximately 16,400 feet above sea level.³⁴

(Note: Taiwan's highest peak is just under 13,000 feet. Mountain ranges in Tibet and Central Asia are much more consistent with the training range listed above, offering insight into other possible areas of operation, such as Tibet.)

Special forces mountain training includes: hostage rescue, battlefield

rescue, ammunition transport, passing through minefields, and first aid. Special forces have also been known to train in the use of armored vehicles, tanks and armed helicopters.³⁵

Wilderness/survival training

Wilderness and survival training is conducted in the Luliang Mountains, located in western Shanxi province. The training area was selected for its "all-weather environment, sparse population, high mountains and dense forest."³⁶ The training consists of a seven-day course. Students learn to catch wild pigs, snakes, fish, birds and insects; to gather flowers, plants and fruits; to find, extract and purify water; to conserve water and prevent dehydration; to make fire by many means; to make shelters and resist rain and insects; to make winter clothing using on-site materials; and to recognize and apply medicinal herbs to wounds.³⁷

Special-forces equipment

Global Positioning System. A cell-phone sized GPS that works in conjunction with three Beidou (Chinese name) all-weather, all-time, regional (including Taiwan) navigational satellites and ground receiver stations to deliver positioning data that is accurate from 1-3 meters.³⁸

Video-voice-data headsets. In 2002, personal VVDH were introduced into select special-forces units.³⁹

Unmanned aerial vehicles. UAV model ASN-104 has been noted in training exercises, but it is reported that more advanced models are already in the field.⁴⁰ There have also been reports of hand-launched UAVs being used to support special forces and other small units.⁴¹

Trimaran Ferry. The Trimaran Ferry is envisioned as a high-speed transport that might be used in combination with UAVs and diesel submarines to assist special-forces units in invading Taiwan. While the ferry is not in the special forces' current inventory, military sources have stated that they are considering adding it.⁴²

Night-vision goggles. While there have been numerous references to China's special forces using NVGs in training and exercises, no specific model has been noted.

Low-light televisions. LLTVs are used for battlefield monitoring.

Powered parachute. The powered parachute is a triangular-shaped parachute that uses a motorized fan to provide self-propulsion. The parachute and fan can be mounted on a solitary jumper, a three-wheeled ve-

hicle or even a boat. In 2002, Beijing's China Central Television showed members of a special forces reconnaissance militia using ultralight trikes (a powered parachute with a three-wheeled vehicle attached) and an ultralight with a small rubber boat, similar to a small Zodiac, attached.⁴³

Zhanshen. A four-wheeled vehicle that is almost identical to the High-Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle used by U.S. forces. The vehicle was developed by the Shenyang Aviation Company and was given the name zhanshen, or "god of war."⁴⁴

Firearms. The Chinese special forces were the first to be equipped with the 5.8 mm KBU88 sniper rifle.⁴⁵

Special-forces units

- **The Beijing Military Region's Recon and Strike Force.** This group is trained to assault airfields and to take out command-and-control elements using assault helicopters, powered parachutes, mortars and flamethrowers. The unit is known to target communications centers, radar systems and ammunition depots. They are considered to be endurance swimmers who are proficient at underwater demolitions and can pilot boats.

- **The Nanjing Military Region's Flying Dragons.** Established in late 1992, the unit conducts training said to be unconventional and carried out with "great intensity" under dangerous conditions.⁴⁶ In 1997, the unit carried out a simulated attack on a concealed enemy airfield in the Zijin Mountains of Nanjing. During the exercise, the group used UAVs to relay battlefield intelligence back to headquarters and assaulted the site using parawings and armed helicopters.⁴⁷

- **The Guangzhou Military Region's Sword of Southern China.** This group, comprising 4,000 soldiers, operates out of Qixi, in the Guangzhou Military Region.⁴⁸ Established in 1988, it is said to be one of the earliest groups formed after China began modernizing its military.⁴⁹ The unit is said to be a triphibious force capable of all-weather warfare; of carrying out long-range airborne operations; of underwater crossings; and of capturing beachheads.

Soldiers of the unit cross-train in 60 subject areas (individual subject areas are not referenced) of the Chinese navy and air force. The unit is trained in contingency operations and has carried out joint training in island operations with other branches of the military.⁵⁰ It is said that the unit has 400 personnel trained to fly aircraft, perform "stunt driving" and pilot boats.⁵¹

- **The Jinan Military Region's Black**

Berets/Heroic Falcons. The Heroic Falcons are trained in special reconnaissance and in triphibious warfare. The members of the unit work daily on upper-body strength and cardiovascular endurance. Soldiers must be able to run 3,300 meters (2.05 miles) in 12 minutes to pass, 3,400 meters (2.11 miles) in 12 minutes to receive a "good," and 3,500 meters (2.17 miles) in 12 minutes to receive an "outstanding." The unit's soldiers also practice Qigong, a Chinese form of martial arts and hand-to-hand combat.

- **The Shenyang Military Region's Fierce Tigers of the Northeast.** This is a marine special-forces unit trained to perform airborne and commando "SEAL-type" assault operations on airfields, command-and-control sites and radar-warning sites using powered parachutes and scuba equipment. Members of the unit undergo extensive survival training in jungle, desert, prairie, mountain and urban conditions.⁵²

- **The Chengdu Military Region's Falcons of the Southwest.** Established in 1992, this group uses high-tech equipment to carry out special combat reconnaissance. The unit has received numerous awards and was profiled in a documentary showing air-assault and forward-reconnaissance skills. The group is credited with attaining amazing results in four disciplines: reconnaissance, airborne insertion, surprise attacks and emergency evacuations.⁵³

- **The Chengdu Military Region's Hunting Leopards.** This unit carried out its first antiterrorism exercise in 2002 in the Xiling Mountains.⁵⁴ From available reporting, it is difficult to ascertain whether this unit is strictly military or has ties to the PAP.

- **The Lanzhou Military Region's Tigers of the Night.** Information on this unit is vague; reports offer only general references to a "certain" special-forces unit located in the Lanzhou Military Region being involved in various types of activities. "North Education," an online site sponsored by the Tianjin Education Committee, references a dedicated special-forces unit in the Lanzhou Military Region and talks about the unit's participation in Estonia's "ERNA" special-forces competition. However, the article does not give any background, the unit's mission or the unit's code name.

- **The Daggers** (military region unknown). This amphibious unit, formed in 2001, is described as "one of the ace cards" for dealing with Taiwanese independence. In 2004, the unit carried out a mock exercise involving the capture of a coastal island in which the unit set up an "electronic interference system," followed by the arrival

of armed helicopters and airborne troops. The unit destroyed the island's airport, oil-storage facilities, command center and ammo dumps. The island was then secured for follow-on forces by removing the enemy's biological and chemical weapons.⁵⁵

Threat analysis

Although it appears that China's special forces are still in the early stages of their development, it would be a mistake to dismiss their capabilities. The PLA began by selecting the most experienced officers and cadre from PRC military forces (estimated to be well in excess of two million).⁵⁶ After establishing the groups, the PLA supplied them with the most advanced equipment available; vigorously cross-trained them in multiple disciplines; and pushed them to their mental and physical limits.

Training scenarios provide insight into the intended use of Chinese special forces. A large portion of the training focuses on skills necessary for infiltrating and invading Taiwan. The decapitation strategy, as applied to Taiwanese civilian leadership, whether or not it is truly a part of PLA strategy, presents two problems. First, like a bomb threat, it has to be taken seriously. Time and resources have to be allocated, and countermeasures put in place, to deal with the threat. Second, the decapitation threat places psychological pressure on the Taiwanese leadership.

If the decapitation strategy is indeed part of a PLA plan, why does the PLA conclude that it would be successful? One possible reason is that it senses a lack of resolve in the U.S. commitment to defend Taiwan, and that a rapidly installed de facto government would be enough to deter U.S. interference. It seems unlikely that the U.S. would acknowledge a new government's legitimacy while Taiwanese forces were still actively engaged. However, it is possible that the PRC envisions that a large portion of Taiwan's military and civilian populace would support the invasion, allowing the PLA to conclude operations before the U.S. had time to act militarily or politically.

Recent world events have raised other possibilities for employment of China's special forces. Is there a scenario in which China's special forces might use the decapitation strategy against North Korea? It is not in China's long-term interest to have an unstable nuclear neighbor. Should China decide to take matters into its own hands and resolve the situation,



Flying Dragons
NANJING MILITARY REGION



Recon and Strike Force
BEIJING MILITARY REGION



Heroic Falcons
JINAN MILITARY REGION

special forces could be used in the same way as we have envisioned them in Taiwan.

The other party that would stand to benefit from a stabilized North Korea would be Russia. Last year, China and Russia held a joint exercise on the Liaoning Peninsula.⁵⁷ Some have speculated that the exercise was related to the Taiwan anti-secession law and designed to place greater pressure on Taiwanese separatists not to move forward. However, the Liaoning Peninsula is located directly across the Yellow Sea from North Korea.

Chinese special forces also present a serious threat to Taiwan's undersea lines of communication. Internal and external communications would be vital for Taiwan in any cross-strait conflict. During the opening salvos, China would more than likely try to isolate the island, shutting off all contact with allies and the outside world. Deploying special forces by submarine would be an ideal method for sabotaging Taiwan's undersea fiber-optic cable system.

Analysts from the RAND Corporation make a particularly dire analysis of Taiwan's communications system in their book, *A Concept of Operations for a New Deep-Diving Submarine*. In the book, they caution:

A recent survey of the number of international submarine cables reaching Taiwan is particularly disconcerting. Four out of five undersea fiber-optic cables reaching Taiwan do so at either Fangshan or Toucheng (the fifth, a "self-healing loop" reaches Taiwan at both, meaning that both cables would have to be damaged for Taiwan to be cut off). ... In short, Taiwan's ability to send and receive data over submarine cables might be significantly impaired by an attack on cables leading into either landing area. ... This information may well have increased relevance in light of China's renewed emphasis on information warfare.⁵⁸

This information is particularly troublesome taken in concert with recent naval activities of Chinese surveillance ships. In August 2004, Taiwan's Prime Minister Yu Shyi-kun stated that Chinese surveillance vessels had made 21 attempts during the previous two years to map underwater terrain in the vicinity of Japanese waters. He further stated that there had been numerous intrusions into Taiwanese territorial waters. The prime minister suggested that these moves were in preparation for a possible conflict with the U.S. and that a fleet of submarines could cross the Pacific defensive line of Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines.⁵⁹ If submarines were used to transport

Chinese special forces to sever or damage these underwater communication lines, it could have devastating repercussions on the outcome of the war.

Given the numerous references to the use of powered parachutes in exercises, it is natural to wonder what risks they might present. Recent improvements in powered-parachute technology have reportedly given newer models the ability to fly up to 100 miles and carry payloads of at least 500 pounds. It is possible that powered parachutes could be air-dropped near target locations and guided in during night infiltration using GPS.⁶⁰ If so, it might put the Penghu Islands, a Taiwan-controlled island chain located approximately in the center of the strait, within range for China to pre-position special forces. Increased payload capacity would allow special forces to attach fairly large munitions to the undercarriage of the powered parachute and direct them to their target using remote guidance.

China's special forces seem to be well on their way toward becoming cohesive and competent units. Successive wins in international reconnaissance competitions show that they are mentally and physically tough, mastering many of the soldier skills needed in combat. The PLA is fully prepared to supply special forces with any and all training and equipment necessary for them to achieve high international standards. A line in the *Beijing Xinhua Domestic Service* sums up their potential capabilities, referring to them as: "fierce tigers on land, dragons at sea and falcons in the sky."⁶¹ **SW**

Notes:

¹ Shui Chih-shan, "China's Special Forces Are World-Class, with the Military's 'Elite Units' Specially Coping with Terrorist Acts," *Hong Kong Kuang Chiao Ching*, 16 February 1999, No. 317, 26-29, as translated by FBIS reference FTS19990223001835.

² Shui Chih-shan, "China's Special Forces Are World-Class."

³ Chang Wanquan and Yu Guohua, "PRC PLA Analysis of 20th-Century Combat Theory," *People's Liberation Army Daily*, 26 January 2000, 5, as translated by FBIS reference FTS20000225000004.

⁴ Chang Wanquan and Yu Guohua, "PRC PLA Analysis of 20th-Century Combat Theory."

⁵ Code names are not a perfect method for identifying units. In some instances, smaller sub-elements within special forces regiments will choose the name of larger units outside of their military region. For example, there are sub-elements within the PLA special forces that refer to themselves as "daggers," which has also been noted as a code name for a "Taiwan contingent" unit.

⁶ "Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - China and Northeast Asia," 3 August 2004.

⁷ "Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - China and Northeast Asia," 7 January 2005.

